

Honor Christ as Holy

Almost everyone you meet is familiar with the treachery of Judas Iscariot. We do not name our children Judas for the same reason we do not name them Benedict—these deceived and betrayed those they were bound to defend. With a green eye Judas watched our Savior's moneybag, and with a cowardly kiss he betrayed him to his death.

But we often forget that Judas was not the only coward that cold night.

As Jesus stands chained before the high priest, accused and slapped in his innocence, a short distance away in the courtyard Peter warms himself by the fire. He is hiding. One servant girl, and then another, had asked him if he was a disciple of this man Jesus. "I am not," he had said.

Now he stands by the fire, afraid.

The eyes of those around are on him; perhaps they whisper to each other. Peter is uncomfortable. Finally they raise a voice: "Certainly you too are one of them, for your accent betrays you." His heart thuds in his ears, we may guess, the prospect of torture now very real to him.

After swearing he bursts out, "I do not know the man." A rooster crows, Jesus turns his head to look at Peter, and the apostle flees with tears more bitter than many of us can understand.

Judas betrayed Jesus like a coward, yes. But so did Peter.

Jesus' primary purpose for Peter, the reason he had given these years of his life to him, was for Peter to be his witness to the world. And in fear, Peter utterly failed at this. In this instance he proved one of the worst evangelists we've ever encountered. Move forward now through several weeks, then several months. We find almost the same scene: the high priest presides over a trial, the Sanhedrin is gathered, the very counsel that condemned Christ. Only now the place by the fire is vacant, and a strong voice sounds from the center of Israel's gathered leaders. It is Peter's voice.

“This man,” he says, “is the stone that was rejected by you, the builders, which has become the cornerstone.” The elders are amazed by this fisherman’s boldness, bring and uneducated man. He continues, “And there is salvation in no one else.”

The apostle Peter is proof that *you* can be a bold, fearless, successful witness for Jesus Christ. You can—you yourself, and not another. You say, “But I’ve tried, and failed so miserably as to call curses upon yourself in denying you’ve ever known Christ, within sight of the chained Christ on the very brink of his crucifixion, you can become, in the hand of God, a bold witness of Christ’s resurrection to the world.

And Peter himself, who experienced the change from coward to lion, tells us how to seek the same change for ourselves.

So let us determine at the outset of this message not to protect ourselves by excuses, not to set them up as Jericho’s gate, locked against God’s will. Do not say, “Well, all others may share Christ, but because of my personality, my history, my inabilities, I cannot.” That is a fine lie the devil has sold you, and what a high price you have paid for it. Open your gates wide to Peter’s wise words this morning, and the king of glory will come in.

1 Peter 3:13-17

Peter knows his readers face not merely rejection by their neighbors, but also hostility. The world is not friendly to their message. But this is irrelevant, in a sense. He knows from experience that they may all be bold proclaimers of the excellencies of Christ, so long as they do one thing.

The key to bold, successful witnessing, no matter what our environment or what our inabilities, is first to set Christ apart in our own hearts. If you do this, you will be ready to stand before rulers and judges of the earth with the eternal gospel; and, much more, before your neighbors with the same firm message of unspeakable hope in Christ.

Set Christ apart in your own heart, and you can do this.

Be zealous for what is good

But this is too vague to be useful. How do we set Christ apart in our hearts? We look to the text for specifics and find:

First, be zealous for what is good.

It is a creed innate to man, with him from the cradle and with him to the grave: religion without love and good deeds is dead.

Look at the verse that sits as King among these verses, purple robe flowing down from its shoulders, glistening scepter in hand—verse 15: “but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy.” Or your translations may say something like, “but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord.” The meaning is similar in either case. But for now, notice the part that does not change:

“but in your hearts.”

When Peter summarizes for us how we are to witness well, as he does in v. 15, he adds this important phrase, “in your hearts.” Why “in your hearts”? Because he wishes to remind us that we cannot hope to tell this hostile world about the power and beauty of our Savior until we have genuinely tasted those facts for ourselves. We must set Christ apart where it counts, where our whole outlook on life is altered. We must take him to heart.

This is the beginning of our bold witness, and this is what, in the economy of God, makes our message credible to those who hear. When we have taken Christ to heart so that our lives are full of love and good deeds, then men will stop what they are doing and look up. It is fair to say that honest good deeds are the billboards, of Christianity, and very often a loving act will find its way into a mind otherwise completely closed to the gospel.

See v. 13: “Now who is there to harm you if you are zealous for what is good?” In other words, although it is common for Christians to suffer persecution at the hands of some, if believers pour their lives into the benefit of all people, most people will respect, if not the Christian, then at least his deeds. In Romans 1 Paul shows that through creation alone, men know right from wrong generally; by God’s common grace the typical unregenerate man tends to recognize what is right even if he does not do right himself.

From the mount Jesus looked at his fledgling disciple and said, “You are the light of the world...let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your

Father who is in heaven.” They must be zealous for good, and this will be their witness.

Think of Elijah, at the great competition against the prophets of Baal. Up on Mt. Carmel Elijah and the prophets set up alters to their deities, but how were the onlookers to determine which deity was truly divine? Elijah gave the clue: “The God that answers by fire, let him be God.”

Well, God does not send fire to the earth to prove himself today, at least to my knowledge. But he has not left himself without a witness. It is said that the preacher Charles Spurgeon, after comparing the good done to London’s poor by the church with the very little done by secular groups, announced, “The God that answers by orphanages, let him be God.”

So then, we begin to become bold witnesses for Christ when we take Christ to heart in such a way that we are zealous for good deeds. Then, as we saw in v. 12 last week, God’s eyes are upon us and his ears open to our prayer, to help us.

I must move on, but let me pause a moment to encourage you. Believer—brother or sister—is there some good work sitting beneath your nose that will beautify the gospel of Jesus Christ? I would be blind if I did not see the thousand already performed by this body of Christians. I’m not hesitant to say, rarely will anyone find an oasis like this in the desert, where God’s children share and serve each so freely and with so much love. By this all men know you are Christ’s disciples. But may I encourage you to excel still more? May I stir up your sincere mind to think, “ok, I exalt Christ before the world by my zeal for good deeds; well then, what good can I do for my neighbors here in my city?” Risk some new endeavor of love—visit the needy and forgotten, offer your last two copper coins for someone else’s good, volunteer somewhere. With such sacrifices God is pleased.

“But,” you say, “good deeds do not always win in the end. They are not perfect tools in evangelism.”

Peter focuses your objection and responds, v. 14: “But even if you should suffer for righteousness’ sake, you will be blessed.”

You have found, I am sure, that not all goodness is respected by the lost. Sometimes unbelievers will go so far as to speak evil of

you because of your zeal for good. This chiefly occurs in three instances: first, when your good influence begins to threaten the prestige someone enjoys; second, when it threatens the finances someone enjoys; and third, when your virtue makes someone feel guilty for their own vice.

Hence, when Jesus' healings and good deeds drew large crowds, the religious leaders conspired against him so that Rome would not come in and remove their place and nation. Or again, when Paul would not come in and remove their place and nation. Or again, when Paul saw men reborn in Ephesus, the idolmaker Demetrius began a riot, since he knew saved men would no longer pay him for his idols. And John the Baptist lost his head for exposing King Herod's sin by word we may presume and life.

Does this threaten our usefulness as Christ's witnesses, when our good deeds are not met with repentance, but hostility?

To the contrary: Peter says that if you suffer for righteousness, you are blessed. This is a liberating fact.

It means that if you have taken Christ to heart and, as a consequence, do what is good, you cannot lose. As the rest of v. 14 says, "Have no fear of them, nor be troubled." Don't worry about how people respond—this is a win-win situation.

If you do good and men respect the good, you will avoid suffering and will sway their minds toward Christ.

If, on the other hand, you do good and are mistreated for it, you are blessed. You are blessed because, as Jesus said, "your reward is great in heaven." You are blessed because you are counted worthy to suffer shame for the name. And, as Peter himself shows later in his letter, believes those who are persecuted mature faster, and for their help the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon them.

So Christian, if you are spoken against for doing good, Peter's advice to you is: don't worry, just keep doing good. Look again to v. 15, through 16: "always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect, having a good conscience, so that, when you are slandered, those who revile your good behavior in Christ may be put to shame."

As a witness to Christ, your desire is the salvation of your opponent. But because you know you cannot bully anyone into it, but must wait on the Spirit of God, you can answer the slanders gently. Be zealous for good especially when you are hated, and like Christ be as a tender sheep before violent shearers. By this your enemies will be embarrassed—in the next life, but hopefully in this that they might repent.

So then, the key to bold witness is first a heartfelt zeal for good deeds.

Fight fear with fear

Secondly, you become a bold, successful witness, setting Christ apart in your own heart, when you fight fear with fear.

Now we address the reason that we have not been sharing the hope of the gospel with those around us: fear.

The fear of man is the devil's greatest against us in this task, and he wields it with skill. He knows the weak places in our armor. He engineers the snide remarks, the movements of face and body, all the signs of disapproval. Plus he whispers to us a million “What if...?” mirages to paralyze us.

Peter too is made of skin and bone, and knows our weakness. He all but trembled before a servant girl. See what he says, beginning at the end of 14: “Have no fear of them, nor be troubled, but in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy.”

The apostle draws his words from what seems his favorite prophet, Isaiah. In Isaiah 7 we find Judah and its king, Ahaz, with hearts shaking like trees in the wind. Two kingdoms to their north, Israel and Aram, were conspiring to sweep down and overthrow them. The people could smell the coming bloodshed.

But God sent his prophet Isaiah to the frightened king to assure him that the Lord would save them. Then in chapter 8 the Lord speaks to Isaiah himself; saying,

Do not call conspiracy all that this people calls conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. But the Lord of hosts, him you shall honor as holy. Let him be your fear, and let him be your dread.

Those who would bear witness to Christ are attacked from the north, so to speak. Their adversary the lion roars to strike fear into their hearts. And the only way they can continue undeterred to speak of their hope is if they fear the Lion of Judah more than the roaring lion.

It is invisible in the English, but in the Greek of 1 Peter 3:14-15, “fear” and “Lord” are both fronted, and so are parallel. It might be read as, “Fear of them you shall not fear...Lord the Christ you shall regard...” You can only focus your mind on either fear or Lord, not both. You must focus on Lord.

Here again we are where we began. What secret turned the pale and cowardly Peter into a lively and immovable bullhorn for the gospel? The secret to bold, successful witnessing is first to set Christ apart in your own heart.

That is what it means to regard him as Lord and as holy. It is to say, “No one is Christ's equal. No man is worth my fear, for man is like fine dust before Christ. This divine being who has no equal has given me a task. Of course I will do it—just look at him!” And this we must let pour through our minds at all times, so that when we are questioned we need only speak our mind. We must always be ready to speak by always thinking of our God and our hope.

Our courage rests in God's right palm, in his mighty right hand. Notice the final verse in our section, v. 17. “For it is better to suffer for doing good, *if that should be God's will*, than for doing evil.”

The Christian can be bold because he knows that opposition must be vetted by God before it is permitted in his life. God is greater than those evil men he allows to malign us. He is powerful, and our reverence for him must like a lion rise up and eat our fear of men.

CONCLUSION

Therefore I can close with this appeal: is Christ set apart in your head? Christian, we have applied this to you—but now I speak to another sort of person.

Maybe you have seen the good that Jesus works in his true followers, and are attracted by it. Maybe that is what brings you here.

You see a world full of murderous acts of terror, see how tainted by deceit and pride politics typically are, and feel like a man drowning in toxic evil. But you come here and your head comes up for air. Here are followers of a great God, one who lowered himself in love to die for the undeserving, that he might join them in love to himself forever.

If this is so, let me bear witness to this Christ, that he is powerful to save. Fears dissolve before his might, and peace is only possible in this world within the security of his unlimited power. Treat Christ as common no more. Set him apart in your heart.

There is salvation in no one else.